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A NOTE ON THE RELATION OF ETHICS TO PROGRESS.

FREDERICK G. HENKE.

AS CIVILIZATION advances, and the techniques and appliances whereby the various needs of life are met become more numerous and complex, the problems of conduct grow more intricate and involved, and their solution correspondingly difficult. An outstanding weakness of our civilization is that the attitude toward the solution of social and ethical problems is essentially the same as it was in earlier periods of human history, when life was simpler and social organizations much less complex. We look to the traditional methods of religion, to customary moral instruction, and to relatively uncontrolled legal enactment, to afford relief; and while we hope and wait untold harm is being done to individuals, the race, and the very fabric of civilization.

The question of the intrinsic value of present civilization is a legitimate one, especially if we mean thereby merely the increase in methods of meeting the physical needs of life, many of which have become highly artificial. It is possible for individuals and groups of individuals to enjoy the conveniences of modern civilization—beautiful homes, rapid transportation, telegraph, telephone, automobiles, democratic form of government, and all the other things that modern life has brought forth to make living more convenient and comfortable—and yet at the same time these persons may be savages at heart; for the difference between enlightenment and savagery is less a matter of the things that are being used than it is of the fundamental attitude toward life. The savage is primarily interested in meeting and adequately supplying physical needs and in maintaining the *status quo* of social organization. But we prefer not to have civilization identified with convenient, comfortable living. Somehow personality and character

must count for something, for to be really enlightened means more than having ability to make one's life more luxurious and comfortable in arithmetical or geometrical progression.

Enlightenment has form as well as content, and of the two the form is the stabler and more enduring. It is precisely at this point that a difficulty has arisen. The rise of scientific method introduced a dualism into the form of conduct, which has given rise to much difficulty in modern life. The saints and scholars of the middle ages had been reasonably successful in amalgamating Hebrew religion and Greek thought and by doing this in unifying the form of the civilization of that day. But Galileo, Copernicus, Francis Bacon, and others caused consternation by emphasizing and advocating a *volteface* in the basic attitude toward progress. It was a tremendous blow for the thought and the institutions of that day to confront a thorough-going reorganization, when it had been confidently believed that fundamentals had been finally established. From Bacon's point of view all these hoary and long-venerated idols needed to be utterly annihilated; but in actual fact they continued to exist as before, though their sphere of influence was somewhat more limited. Modern science, though weak and ill cared for at first, grew and developed, while alongside it religion, conduct in its moral aspects, and, to a large extent, education, continued under the domination of tradition and custom.

These are the conditions which we confront at the present time. Scientific method prevails in laboratory, factory, and workshop; but in matters of conduct we are still under the influence of the same internal and external sanctions as of old. As we continue under these influences the problems are becoming progressively larger and more threatening. A purely conceptual universe, untarnished by the world of fact, may be a beautiful thing to contemplate, but its relation to the stern realities of life is exceedingly disappointing. Modern social problems bombard us with insistent demand for adequate solution, and

we try to cope with them with rusty spear and dulled battle-axe, while they threaten us with destruction.

Cases in point are not hard to find. The capital and labor issue has existed since some men have sought and employed other men; but prior to the industrial revolution of the eighteenth century its implications and external manifestations, while important and often exasperating, were not nearly so pregnant with lasting injury to the entire social organism as to-day. In the presence of the recently threatened railway strike the President of the United States was so appalled at the probable outcome that he set aside the principle of arbitration and sought refuge in legal enactment to avert a great calamity. No very vivid imagination is required to picture the dire results upon city, town, and country, as well as upon foreign relations, that sudden cessation of railway traffic would inflict. In our day it is almost literally possible for a group of men—sometimes a comparatively small group—to get nations, perhaps even the entire world, by the throat and force its demands home. This is an ominous cloud on the social horizon.

In a recent number of this JOURNAL, under the caption, "Marriage and the Population Question,"¹ Bertrand Russell called attention to another social problem which bulks large in England, France, and other countries. Statistics show that the population in France has been practically stationary for some time, and that England is about to face like conditions. Some portions of the population are dwindling, which means that they are gradually becoming extinct; other sections are increasing. "The sections that are increasing are the very poor, the shiftless and drunken, the feeble-minded—feeble-minded women, especially, are apt to be very prolific. . . . If an average sample of children were taken out of the population of England, and their parents were examined, it would be found that prudence, energy, intellect, and enlightenment were less common among the parents than

¹ Int. Jour. Ethics, Vol. XXVI, pp. 443-461.

in the population in general, while shiftlessness, feeble-mindedness, stupidity, and superstition were more common than in the population in general."² These conditions so vividly depicted by an Englishman and careful student of English life need no special comment to show present-day tendencies, especially when seen from the biological perspective. Their significance is greatly enhanced when we realize that they are true of many, if not all countries, in which material civilization has reached a high point of development.

However, they are but two of many great modern problems, pointing to the larger issue, which reduced to simple terms is this: Shall progress continue, or shall decay of energy and intelligence take the ascendancy in modern life? If the latter prevails, our over-eulogized European civilization of to-day may eventually lie in the scrap-heap by the side of Roman, Grecian, Egyptian, and Babylonian civilizations. It will not do in the face of the tremendous problems of the hour to say that there has been progress in the past and that the future may best be judged by what has preceded. Evolution will doubtless go on, but no assurance is present that lapses may not occur in the instance of particular nations and peoples.

It is an incontrovertible fact that the development of civilization since the time of Galileo and Bacon is in a very large measure due to the use of the scientific method. Stripped of its unessentials, scientific method consists in suspending judgment until the bearing of all available related facts has been made explicit; and it includes a diligent search for the facts that have a bearing upon the case in point. It is for these reasons that science makes constant use of the laboratory. In the realms of organic and inorganic chemistry, theoretical and applied physics, geology, biology, and related sciences, the inductive method is readily applied and of inestimable value; but from the standpoint of modern progress the critical issue centers

² *Int. Jour. Ethics*, Vol. XXVI, pp. 449 f.

about its application to individual and social problems of conduct.

We are raising corn, cattle, and chickens by improved scientific methods; while that which is most valuable, human life, is obliged to find its way through the intricate labyrinth of modern social and economic life as best it can—largely by the trial and error method. Every year thousands of youths leave our schools without the slightest clue of the best direction for them to take. Knowing little or nothing about the pernicious effects of commercialized pleasure upon human life and welfare, and being even less informed regarding their aptitudes for certain vocations, or their disabilities for work in others, they soon become the flotsam and jetsam of human society.

In this connection it has been customary to emphasize the place of home and church as efficient factors in promoting social adjustment and social efficiency. Doubtless these have important functions to fulfil in society. The mother and the father may do much provided they have knowledge; but since in the majority of cases they are at sea themselves, without chart or compass, genuine progress is at this point largely accidental. The church on its part is in most instances well-intentioned. It would in some way prove a real salt of the earth, but it too is circumscribed by the very nature of the situation to do little more for the actual content of conduct than tradition—in this instance, largely church tradition—prescribes. The function of the church is, after all, more to furnish the psychological motive than the what, or content, of conduct. In so far as it has undertaken to dictate the what of action, it has proven itself subject to numberless limitations. When, however, it inculcates the law of love, urging men to utilize it as the main-spring of action, our very natures rouse themselves in sympathetic response. It is unfair of society to demand of home and church the solution of problems which these agencies can solve only when society itself has valiantly done its part.

The dualism which has existed in the form of conduct

since the rise of modern science and which, if continued, will do untold harm, may be removed in case the old sanctions of religion and ethics are abandoned in so far as they pertain to attitudes which, though traditional, not only lack vital relation to the life process but thwart the attainment of necessary values. That which is really life-giving should obviously not be dropped. The law of love firmly rooted in the powerful human sentiment of sympathy is a case in point. A union between benevolence on the one hand and the scientific attitude on the other is what society needs more than anything else at the present time. Neither of these without the other is adequate for the task.

Society confronts a twofold task. In the first place, the effects of definite types of conduct upon individuals and upon the group as a whole should be consistently and faithfully investigated according to the most approved methods of science, and after valuable discoveries have been made, these should be exhibited for the benefit of the people. No one should remain uninstructed in the things that pertain to the promotion of human welfare. Many of these investigations cannot be made adequately by private or corporate agencies, and for this reason they should be made under expert supervision by the government.

And then, in the second place, society should continue to reinforce the efforts of home and church in making the ideal content of action the actual content. It is the function of society to see to it that men do the things that ought to be done.

The question of the content of conduct, the form having been disposed of, remains to be considered; the end to be subserved and promoted through scientific research under the influence of benevolence must be exhibited. We have stated it in general terms as progress, but progress is one of those terms which need closer and more accurate definition. The quest takes us in the direction of a search for, and an analysis of, the fundamental interests of society.

Historically the *summum bonum* has been variously

defined; for hedonism, energism, and rigorism, in ancient and modern garb, have essayed to describe it. The higher types of hedonism, as exemplified in John Stuart Mill's utilitarianism and Spencer's evolutionary hedonism, have grappled with the problem in modern form, but without being able to offer a satisfactory solution. Here again modern science has come to the rescue, for modern psychology, especially in its social aspects, has contributed much to a clearing up of the situation. It has shown that two extremes are to be avoided. In the first place, human beings are not primarily and fundamentally rational in interest and aim. Intelligence is an instrument of adaptation, and as such is subject to development; it is but one of a number of interests. In the second place, feeling and emotion are also instruments which facilitate adaptation. They are not, under normal conditions, ends of action, but monitors preceding and accompanying adaptive acts. Their original biological function is readily discernible, but their value as guides in questions of morals is open to serious objection. From generation to generation men have acted on the theory that action is right or wrong in accordance with the approval or disapproval it elicits, and in so doing they have often inflicted lasting injury upon themselves and others. Progress is something more than the realization of ends which produce a feeling of pleasure. It is a progressively increased sharing of a growing proportion of the world's population in the things that satisfy the great fundamental interests of human individuals and human society.

These interests emerge out of the fundamental congenital and acquired needs of mankind; their roots are firmly imbedded in the specific and general tendencies of human nature. Objectively they are the acts and things that meet these needs. They have been well summed up under six or seven heads as health, wealth, knowledge, sociability, beauty, rightness and religion.³ Rightness is the nexus that binds them all together. The highest

³ Small, *General Sociology*, p. 198, gives the first six.

human good is a state in which increasing proportions of the world's population share in a constant approach toward more and better satisfaction of the health, wealth, sociability, knowledge, beauty, rightness, and religion desires.⁴ This type of the highest good makes progress consist in the increased sharing of all men in the things that promote human welfare. From this point of view, there is serious maladjustment where there is increasing poverty in certain sections with decreasing wealth, health, knowledge, sociability, beauty, rightness, and religion, while in other sections of the population there is increased enjoyment of these interests. The things that naturally should have primacy—human welfare, the ongoing of the social process—receive the emphasis they merit, if the *summum bonum* is interpreted in this way.

One item needs to be emphasized especially: human welfare is not merely an increased sharing of the world's population in some few of the fundamental interests,—wealth and knowledge, for instance, but an increasing participation in all of them. A man may have great wealth or knowledge, while he lacks much in well-being and is a constant menace to the welfare of others. That is precisely the great danger which America, as well as Europe, confronts. The wreckage of the past abundantly confirms the fact that over-development of one interest or a group of these fundamental interests while others are partially neglected will in time work certain havoc. There is crying need for a change of front: conduct should be standardized by the application of scientific method rather than by tradition and sentiment.

The objection which is usually advanced, when a scientific program is proposed within the suggested field, is that it is unfeasible, in fact impossible. However the achievements of science have been so marvelous during the past few hundred years and the need is so great that skepticism and lethargy are suicidal. To urge complexity as an insurmountable barrier is certainly untimely in an age

⁴Small, *General Sociology*, p. 683.

like the present; and surely the things that meet the fundamental needs of life are sufficiently objective to invite the application of scientific method. The magnificent achievements of medical science show clearly what can be accomplished in the prevention and cure of disease. The self-sacrificing work of Carroll, Reed, Agramonte, and Lazear in the discovery of the yellow fever bacillus is an outstanding case in point; and the construction of the Panama Canal in the presence of almost insurmountable obstacles no less so. The methods of acquiring and distributing wealth are surely as open to scientific investigation as ways of contracting and spreading disease; and work already in progress within the field of knowledge—we usually call it education—reveals the fact that science can do much here. Nor are the social, artistic, and religious interests exempt, for social and religious psychology have done substantial pioneer work in studying these.

The real reason why scientific method is not being applied in thorough-going fashion is not to be found in the lack of objectivity of the things with which action deals and the effects in which it terminates, but in the fact that the problems are approached and studied with an antiquated attitude. That the people as a whole should fail to appreciate the actual conditions is not surprising, but it does seem deplorable that so few of the political and religious leaders of the age are awake to the situation.

A few illustrations suggested by the present national and international situation may perhaps serve to make the standpoint here taken clearer. Within the last decade the moving-picture industry has assumed such tremendous proportions that there is scarcely a town or village of any size where there is not at least one photo-play theatre. American people of all walks of life and of all ages frequent these theatres in great numbers. The young are especially attracted by the comedy and the tragedy so realistically portrayed there. The ethical implications of this movement have received very inadequate consideration, and yet we may accept it as a dictum that any movement that

permanently attracts a large proportion of the population should be carefully studied for its ethical effects.

A scientific approach to this with a view to discovering moral effects would involve an accurate investigation of the relations this has to the fundamental interests of society. Does it contribute to larger sharing of an increasing proportion of the population in the things that satisfy human needs and promote human progress? What is its influence in affecting the patterns of living which the patrons follow? What are its possibilities of propaganda in shaping public opinion? To begin with, the patrons would constitute the legitimate field of inquiry. Large numbers of individuals in different towns and in widely separated sections of the country, as well as of very different social and occupational interests, should be chosen. Men who have a professional knowledge of medicine and experience with all classes of men, and experts in social technology, should carry on the investigation in a perfectly non-partisan, dispassionate way, with the understanding that prejudice should have no place in the enterprise. The project is one of large proportions and will require patience and a large amount of energy. However, the stake is enormous; for human betterment is well worth striving for.

The great international situation is perhaps too near us for the calm attitude of scientific investigation, yet certain things are so obvious that we are forced to recognize them. One problem for the scientist stands out conspicuously. Some means for enforcing international agreements must be devised. Legal, political, and military sciences must contribute to the solution, but a better knowledge of the actual motives which govern men and of the method by which these motives may best be brought to bear is a problem in which the social psychologist is particularly concerned. In this case the very urgency of the matter is a challenge to the resourcefulness of science. The time to strike is when the iron is hot.

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